FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER's

COURSE IN PRAYER

by Francis Merchant

LESSON 1

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LESSON 1

THE UPTURNED CUP

In all ages, man, the great enigma, has sought to define his meaning in a time-bound world of endless change and certain death. Like a clock that has been wound, his life unfolds stage by stage, from childhood to maturity, and from maturity to old age—and in the midst of the process he pauses to discover the meaning of his appearance in this dimension of consciousness. That pause is charged with significance. It is a moment in which he puts aside all material concerns and addresses himself to primary questions relating to the purpose of his sojourn in time present, set between the partitions of the unknown past and the infinite future.

Out of this endeavor to explain his journey from birth to death the religions of the world have arisen. They all seek to lend meaning to his pilgrimage in time and space, and to indicate how he may most fittingly spend his energies during the transient period of his earthly existence. All of them seek to illuminate the heights and depths of human nature and to point him in the direction of his greater potentialities. In all cases he is admonished to turn his attention to the inner life, to the world of essences, and away from the domain of purely objective appearances. When this has been done, man himself becomes a problem in search of a solution, an effect in search of its cause. Those who move in this direction tend to cultivate subjective dimensions in their natures and to listen more carefully to what has been called the voice of the silence. They accept the task of transforming themselves, just as the sculptor accepts the task of shaping rough-hewn stone into a desired image.

Nature affords a fascinating illustration of transformation in the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The laboriously crawling creature enters a cocoon and emerges as a flying insect, beautifully attired. The change that takes place, it is interesting to note, occurs in a subjective state of withdrawal. The cocoon is the necessary link between caterpillar and butterfly. If we ponder on this transformation, viewing the entire pro-

cess symbolically as it might apply to human beings, we perceive the necessity of intense subjective activity in the transformation of consciousness. In many religions this stage of indrawing and reshaping of the self in a new image is associated with meditation and prayer.

The first point to establish is the possibility of a comparable metamorphosis in the human being; and the second, the means whereby such a change can be brought about.

All religions provide us with examples of the transformation of consciousness. Saint Francis was a pleasure-loving young man, but he suddenly renounced the world and extolled the virtues of poverty. A Sufi mystic was at one time the head of a band of thieves. Mary Magdalen's story is well known. The Buddha, on occasion, made converts among hardened brigands.

While man cannot retire into a cocoon like a caterpillar, other means are available to him. It is given to him to change his polarization or focus of awareness. The individual reaches inward, seeking to find a deeper center of gravity within himself, that creative essence of which the outer persona or image is but an externalization. The nature of that inner self has been variously designated in world religions. To the Hebrews, it is the shekinah; to Christians, "the Christ in you"; to Sufis, the divine friend; to Buddhists, the all-compassionate Buddha-essence; to Taoists, it is tao; to the Hindus, Krishna. In all cases we observe a restructuring of life resulting from the integration of consciousness about a new center of gravity.

Meditation involves increased sensitivity to the delicate and imponderable thoughts that fall noiselessly upon the screen of consciousness. The cup of awareness is turned upward, ready to be filled. Prayer is invocative and creative. It requires the formulation of that which is desired and an attempt to precipitate outwardly that which has been interiorly approved. Implied in meditation and prayer, then, is the concept of man as the receiver and transmitter of energies.

A man's life may be described in terms of what he has received from life and what he in turn gives. There is reason to believe that only too many men are unaware of all that has been

granted to them, and an equal number do not appear to have an adequate conception of the innumerable gifts that it lies in their power to confer. Indeed, there is much in our civilization that tends to obscure these issues. Rebellious voices proclaim that little or nothing has been received, and in literature one reads again and again the belief that man is a creature of dust, doomed to eke out his days in misery and frustration while death hides ominously and sullenly at some unexpected turn of the road. Such a view helps to create a climate of thought that is antithetical to the development of man's subtler spiritual resources.

It should be understood that meditation and prayer derive their significance in large measure from a broad appreciation of man's potentialities. If we think meanly of the human estate, if we have a limited conception of what it means to be a human being, we may get little benefit from practices that concern the inner life. The assumption of behaviorists, for example, that man is nothing but a superior animal, or of the naturalists, who assert that he is the plaything of a capricious and purposeless universe, describes a limiting circle around their possible conclusions. The pre-Columbus authorities who fixedly believed that the earth was flat could never approve even the attempt to circumnavigate the globe.

The testimony of all religions exalts the human estate. The Buddhists speak of the possibility of achieving the expansion of consciousness known as nirvana; the Christians declare that the kingdom of God, covered by many veils, to be sure, is within each person; the Hindu tells us of a higher self and the possibility of attunement with it upon achieving the state of samadhi; the Hebbrews indicate that God's breath is man's life; the Sufis say much about mystic union with God. In all cases the possibilities inherent in the human experience are enlarged. Each faith lights fires that reveal new paths to a greater destiny. Horizons expand, and the spiritual striver catches sight of new mountains to climb. Thus the human estate is enriched and the nobler possibilities of creative living are increased. Men learn that they are actors in a greater drama, and theirs is the privilege of writing their own parts in the script.

Expansive assumptions regarding man's role in cosmos point to the need for the exploration of inner space. The Old Testament makes the arresting assertion that man is made in the image of God. In the Middle Ages it was believed by some that each human being is a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm. In kabalistic literature the divine essence of light called Neshamah, present in every son of man, is inalienably allied with God. In Mahayana Buddhism, the striving soul that achieves self-mastery transcends the human state and may then embark upon nobler adventures in other realms of being. In these instances the assumption should be followed by demonstration or exploration. The means to such great ends involve meditation and prayer.

These considerations underlie the projected quest. The search in question should yield the enrichment of life, the enlargement of perspectives, and the unveiling of a nobler vision of destiny. These are the objectives that we set ourselves as we experiment with techniques of the inner life.

Walking on a Rainbow

Our schools emphasize the importance of reason, but much less is said about a need to stretch the imagination. The ability to reason, a remarkable faculty which has helped man transform the world, is yet but one aspect of his many endowments. It should be complemented by the cultivation of the imagination. It is an instrument of self-transformation. The poet and the artist have consistently stressed the larger dimension opened up by the imaginative faculty. "Out of three notes," Browning wrote about a composer, "he created, not a fourth, but a world." Beethoven and Wagner transport the listener into a realm of enchantment that belies the humdrum domain of the commonplace. Poets like Whitman and Shelley lift us out of the daily round into a more rarefied dimension of experience. Fairy tales, honored in all countries, project us into a world of fantasy. Mythology changes the shape of the universe for us and alters the very atmosphere in which we live. It is the creative imagination in all these cases that is the agent whereby all things are made new. This is a theme that will be emphasized again and again.

What a man imagines himself to be is of cardinal importance in his life experience. If he conceives himself to be a small and insignificant bit of driftwood in a vast and alien universe, he will rather easily fall into despair. If he regards himself as nothing but a walking stick of protoplasm supported by a framework of bone, remaining on earth for a brief moment before being swept into oblivion, he may readily lose heart. If he imagines that the universe was created by chance and that he is nothing but an adventitious accident, he may find the taxing experiences of life unbearable. On the other hand, if he can view the universe as a thought in the mind of a creator and earth as a testing place where he has the opportunity to develop the capacities of his soul, he may acquit himself bravely. Keats took new heart when he viewed the human experience as a process for the fashioning and developing of the soul. Greek mythology tells us that the labors of Hercules prepared him for his post-mortem translation to the starry heavens as a constellation. Such a life view is invigorating, opening new vistas of possibilities and lending meaning to our struggles and sufferings. To conceive of the larger framework that adds another dimension to man's striving is an act of the spiritual imagination. Thought must soar to achieve this perspective.

The religions of the world are constantly calling upon us to exercise the creative imagination. The Hindus tell us that each man's higher self is a being of grandeur and that atma, or divine spirit, resides in his heart. A Sufi mystic referred to himself as "a pen in the controlling hand of the Lord." The Buddha asked his disciples to imagine their thoughts encompassing the world with peace and joy. The Hebrews referred to God as a mighty fortress. Christians believe in ministering angels and guiding stars.

Meditation and prayer require this kind of outreaching. The meditator remembers he is living in a universe of mysteries and marvels. He knows that we are surrounded by unknown powers and is pleased that the explainable is but a minute fraction of the unexplainable. No one knows the original cause of the cosmos or the significance of the drama of the heavens. No one can explain how it is that life is self-perpetuating over aeons of time. Even

the nature of thought is not understood. In a universe where the vastness of human ignorance far outweighs the tiny accumulation of knowledge, the meditator is disinclined to shut off the valves of the imagination and to set limits to man's aspirations and achievements. He is well aware that the purpose of man's long journey in time and space is attended by more questions than answers, that soul and spirit are variously defined, that death and the possibility of life without form are still engirt in mystery. In such a world the meditator refuses to take refuge in rigid and unthinking negation. Instead, he prefers to walk on a rainbow and to light his candle at the stars.

Turning the Prayer Wheel

The tradition of prayer is universal. In all ages men have appealed to higher powers, sensing the involvement of the creator in his creation. Of course, the nature of the prayers was diverse; some concerned personal requests; others voiced a desire to achieve unity with the originating source. A Muslim mystic expressed the value of impersonal prayer when he wrote: "O God, Thou knowest that Paradise weighs not with me so much as the wing of a gnat. If Thou befriendest me by Thy recollection, and sustainest me by Thy love, and makest it easy for me to obey Thee, then give Thou Paradise to whomsoever Thou wilt."

The manner in which other generations have prayed deserves careful study, for the aspirations of human beings down the ages have created a climate of thought which might be regarded as a kind of psychic environment. A Greek, knowing the psychological tendency of human beings to request that which is harmful, formulated the following prayer: "Do not grant me what I request, even though I pray for it, if it be not good for me." It requires a good measure of maturity to understand that our own prescriptions may yield questionable results. For this reason, perhaps, the one who prays often uses the self-effacing statement, "Thy will be done, not mine." To know what is best for a person in any given situation requires the highest order of insight and wisdom.

The Hindus set forth creative life objectives in the exhortation: "Lead us from darkness to light, from error to truth, from

the unreal to the real, from death to immortality"; and to this has been added, "Lead us from chaos to beauty, from the individual to the universal." How these results may be achieved is not spelled out, for the methods vary widely in accordance with the differing needs of human beings. The universal desirability of moving in the direction of such goals, however, is generally acknowledged.

The mood and disposition of the one who prays should also be considered. Reflective, calm, and composed, he eschews disturbing agitation and distracting excitement. "Be still and know that I am God," enjoins one of the Psalms. Again, we read, "In quietness and confidence shall be thy strength." From the Talmud we gather that the attitude itself has a significant value. "Silence," it is said, "is a healing for all ailments."

The Lord's Prayer has been spoken for many centuries, and its repetition has made it a familiar exhortation. It asks that the kingdom of God be established on earth, that a higher power guide and direct the human race in accordance with its superior wisdom. The Ave Maria is associated with the rosary that, as legend recounts, was said to have been given to Saint Dominic.

Each person understands that he is, in the very nature of things, a small unit in a universe of inconceivable vastness and overwhelming energy. When he contrasts his smallness with the incommensurate greatness of cosmos, he seeks to identify himself with the spiritual purpose that governs the creation. In this spirit the Psalmist wrote: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea."

A modern exhortation invokes transforming light, and love, and power to the end that the human race might fulfill the purpose for which it was intended:

From the point of light within the mind of God,
Let light stream forth into the minds of men.
Let light descend on earth.

From the point of love within the heart of God,

Let love stream forth into the hearts of men.
May Christ return to earth.

From the center where the will of God is known,
Let purpose guide the little wills of men,
The purpose which the Master knows and serves.

From the center which we call the race of men,
Let the plan of love and light work out,
And may it seal the door where evil dwells.

Let light and love and power restore the plan on earth.

Enlargement of Scope

Prayer is often associated with orthodoxy and with the repetition of stereotyped requests. Such a view is partial and limiting. Everyone, both orthodox and unorthodox, may find the practice of prayer meaningful. Of course, much depends on our definition of this spiritual exercise.

The focusing of thought for constructive ends is prayer, and the sensitizing of our response mechanism so that it might register the subtleties of the inner life is meditation. Every person who addresses himself to solving a problem is really asking for the light that will produce a solution. When the problem involved touches the larger concerns of human existence, the relationship of man to his source or to his fellows, we enter a subtler dimension of awareness. In so doing, we approach one of the sacred tasks given to every son of man—the task of discovering who he is and into what he is capable of unfolding. The search for meaning, the effort to untie the knot in which all are bound, should lead to an enrichment of life and a broadening of consciousness.

In connection with our central theme, several questions immediately arise. For what do we pray, and to whom? These questions will no doubt be answered in varied ways by different people. Let us merely list a number of creative possibilities, knowing in advance that we can provide only tentative answers to a multi-dimensioned problem. We pray for enlightenment, for

the understanding that will enable us to live wisely and not to waste our days in a vain search for baubles, for the strength to endure adversity, for the grace to be worthy of our sufferings, for light to define the path to the Highest, for the alleviation of human tribulation, for the vision that will guide the feet of struggling humanity.

We pray because we have faith that the powers responsible for our presence in this space-time continuum have set us here for a purpose that we are called upon to discover. Some persons may pray to that part within themselves that links them with the infinite and the eternal—that which the Hebrews call Neshamah, and the Hindus, the Krishna essence. Others may pray to the subjective source from which all objective existence flows—to the Father in heaven, as the Christian phrases it, or to the Beloved of the Sufi mystic.

ASSIGNMENT

1. *Optional.* Would you care to comment on the pages you have just read? Perhaps you might wish to share your views in connection with the various subjects discussed.

2. *Experiment.* If you are so minded, would you experiment with yourself and record the results? Formulate one or more prayers in regard to a problem that concerns you, saying them daily in an atmosphere of quiet. Indicate the results, if any, that you observe.

3. As an exercise in the stretching of the imagination, consider your mind as a radiating point of light. Send forth that light to others; in addition, suffuse yourself with this invisible radiance as though you were giving yourself a light-bath. Note the results.

When you have completed the above assignment, you are invited to send it to The Editor, Fellowship in Prayer, Room 10-E, 200 East 36 Street, New York, N.Y. 10016. All replies will be confidential.